

## CLAIMS

1. A system for dispensing articles to a consumer, said system  
2 comprising:

a first station at which articles having an assigned cash value are  
4 dispensed,

6 said first station a) comprising a first terminal at which a user identification  
related to an account can be input to process a user request for an article and b)  
5 capable of causing articles to be dispensed to a user,

8 said dispensing system further comprising a processing system, said  
processing system causing an article to be dispensed to a user at the first station  
10 in response to a user's inputting of a user's identification related to an account at  
the first terminal.

2. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein a  
plurality of articles having different cash values are provided at the first station to  
2 be dispensed.

3. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the  
2 processing system is capable of monitoring a user cash account maintainable by  
a user and related to a user's identification.

4. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the  
2 first station further comprises an input site at which a user can initiate a transaction  
to cause dispensing of an article at the first station.

5. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 4 wherein  
2 articles of different cash values can be dispensed at the first station and a user  
can initiate a transaction by identifying through the input site an article of a desired  
4 cash value to be dispensed.

6. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 3 wherein the  
2 processing system is capable of determining whether a balance in a user cash  
account is at least equal to an assigned cash value to an article that is selected  
4 through a user request for the selected article at the first station.

7. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 3 wherein the  
2 processing system is capable of adding funds to a user cash account in response  
to a user direction at the first station.

8. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 7 wherein the  
2 first terminal comprises a key pad into which a user identification related to an  
account can be input.

9. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 7 wherein the  
2 dispensing system further comprises a credit card reader to allow funds to be  
added to a user cash account by processing a credit card.

10. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the  
2 articles comprise tickets or tokens redeemable for at least one of a) another article  
and b) a service.

11. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the  
2 articles comprise at least one of a) an edible/consumable item, b) a functional  
item, and c) a novelty item.

2        12. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 further comprising a second station that is similar to the first station and the processing system causes an article to be dispensed to a user at either of the first and second stations in response to a user's inputting of a user's identification related to an account at the terminal at either of the first and second stations.

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2        13. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 12 wherein the processing system further comprises a central processor at a first location through which control of each of the first and second stations is coordinated at second and third locations, respectively, that are remote from the first location.

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2        14. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 13 wherein the central processor is capable of tracking transactions carried out at the first and second stations from the first location.

2        15. The system for dispensing articles according to claim 1 wherein the first terminal is capable of processing a user request for an article without requiring inputting of any foreign object at the first terminal.

16. A method of dispensing articles, said method comprising the steps

2 of:

4 providing a first station at which articles can be dispensed to a user;

6 creating a cash account for a first user;

8 assigning a user identification related to the first user's cash account;

10 at the first station processing a request by the first user for a selected article

12 by determining the first user's identification in response to an input by the first

user;

14 after determining the first user's identification, causing the selected article

16 to be dispensed; and

18 causing an assigned value for the article to be reflected in the first user's

20 cash account.

17. A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 wherein the

2 step of processing a request by the first user comprises processing a request by

4 the first user by determining the first user's identification, in response to an input

6 by the first user, that does not require input or processing of a foreign object at the

8 first station.

18. A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 further  
2 comprising the steps of providing a second station at which articles can be  
dispensed to a user and operatively interconnecting the first and second stations  
4 so that the first user can cause a selected article to be dispensed at either of the  
first and second stations and cause the assigned value for the selected article  
6 dispensed at either of the first and second stations to be reflected on the first  
user's cash account.

19. A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 further  
2 comprising the step of monitoring transactions at the first station from a location  
remote from the first station.

20. A method of dispensing articles according to claim 16 wherein the  
2 step of providing a first station comprises providing a first station at which articles  
comprising at least one of: a) tickets or tokens redeemable for at least one of i)  
4 another article and ii) a service; b) an edible/consumable item; c) a functional item;  
and d) a novelty item can be dispensed to a user.